

SECTION 1

**EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY**

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The Boston Parks and Recreation Department (BPRD) is the largest landowner within City government and the second largest owner of land in Boston overall. BPRD owns 2,196 acres of permanently protected open space, 1,000 acres of which make up the historic Emerald Necklace. This inventory includes 283 properties with two golf courses, 72 squares, 17 fountains, 210 courts, 12 street hockey rinks, 16 historic burying grounds and three active cemeteries. Additionally, BPRD maintains 27 urban wilds, four high school athletic fields and a total of 37 properties which it does not own. BPRD also manages the care of more than 38,000 public street trees in addition to the trees within its parks.

The City's open space system is critical to the quality of life of its residents. BPRD acts as a steward of publicly-owned parks on behalf of the people of Boston, it owns and maintains clean and safe open spaces, and focuses on access, equity and excellence so that every neighborhood has open space that serves people and the environment. It advocates for open space to balance real estate development and population growth, updates aging infrastructure that is heavily used, and in some places historically significant, with sustainable design that is climate resilient.

The 2023-2029 *Open Space and Recreation Plan* (OSRP) provides BPRD an opportunity to assess the current open space system through data analysis, research, mapping and public input. This assessment is the basis of an action plan that will guide the City's work heading towards 2030. It will inform investment, programming, operations, citywide initiatives, and evaluation of ongoing policy work.

The inventory and analysis of existing open space (Sections 4, 5, and 7) and the public input process (Sections 2 and 6) found that the park system currently includes:

- Exceptional walkable access to existing open spaces for most residents in the city
- Decreased ratio of permanently protected open space per 1,000 residents
- Increased impacts due to density of development
- Increased importance for park land to provide climate resilience
- Increased need for tree canopy to combat heat impacts of climate change.
- Increased park demand due to COVID-19
- Increased value of publicly-owned open space for civic, social and community building
- Disparities in the distribution of open space acreage, features and amenities, leading to inequities in the city related to the benefits open space provides
- A need to provide facilities and features to serve park users of all ages and abilities
- A treasured system of historic parks that require improvements to meet current use
- Increased demand for active recreational space for organized sports at all levels

BPRD sees three broad challenge areas within the plan:

1. Open space quantity and distribution
2. Open space quality and improvements
3. Open space functionality and resilience

OPEN SPACE QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION

POPULATION GROWTH

The Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA) has projected a total population of 740,000 residents in Boston by 2030.¹ That number is anticipated to rise to 800,000 by 2050.

Mayor Michelle Wu has stated the following about projected population growth in Boston (qtd. in Marchese):

“I have in my head the number 800,000, which was the peak of Boston’s population in the 1950s. So the question is: How do we ensure that we can be a green and growing city that’s healthy and affordable for everyone? We need to have the infrastructure to be able to support getting back to that height of our population with growth that is equitable and sustainable.”

BPRD sees this goal of being a “green and growing city” as the core of our work as outlined in this plan.

OPEN SPACE ACREAGE

At the time of the 2015-2021 OSRP, Boston had 617,594 residents and 4,689 acres of permanently protected open space, primarily owned by the City and State. This meant there was a ratio of 7.6 acres of protected open space per 1,000 residents.

Since 2015, the ratio of open space to residents has decreased as density has increased. Boston currently has 689,326 residents and 4,874 acres of permanently protected open space. This is a ratio of 7.1 acres of permanently protected open space per 1,000 residents - a reduction of a ½ acre of open space per 1,000 residents in seven years.

Setting aside whether the ratio of 7.6 acres per 1,000 residents adequately and equitably serves the people of Boston, it has been the ratio we all benefited from in recent years. With a current ratio of 7.1 acres per 1,000 people, the City is at a

point where it needs to be strategic in addressing open space needs alongside population growth so that it doesn’t continue down a path of progressively reduced levels of open space access. As the City’s population reaches 700,000, another 75 acres of protected open space needs to be added to maintain our current ratio of 7.1 acres per 1,000 people.

Looking ahead at the impacts to open space access that comes with population growth, with projected growth to 740,000 residents by 2030 the city would need 5,232 acres of permanently protected open space in order to maintain a 7.1 acres per 1,000 ratio. This would mean adding 358 acres of protected open space to the current inventory by 2030. To maintain the same ratio with the projected growth to 800,000 residents by 2050 the City would need 5,657 acres of permanently protected open space. This would mean adding 783 acres of open space to the current inventory by 2050.

BALANCING OPEN SPACE AND DEVELOPMENT

The provision of significant open space is a difficult challenge in the face of additional land use priorities such as the projected need to build 6,000 housing units a year leading up to 2030 to try to address the acute housing shortage in our city.

The need to protect or acquire hundreds of acres of open space is particularly difficult given the demand for development that fuels the regional economy and provides for the tax base, and also the desire for increased density and more affordable housing to offset the significant provision of high-end housing in the recent past. The provision of housing is a priority for a livable city for all, and there is a significant equity issue in the need to provide open space to serve housing - particularly affordable housing.

As the City plans for permanently protected open space into 2030, the projected 8.7%

¹ BPDA Research Division projections.

² Population figures based on the 2016-2020 American Community Survey.

population growth will need to be strategically factored in, so that residents can continue to expect a comparable level of service from the City’s open space system. New open space opportunities will need to be identified through planning, policies and partnerships across agencies in order to sustain the shared benefits that our open space system provides Bostonians today.

OPEN SPACE IN PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

BPRD continually advocates for open space as critical infrastructure that balances development and maintains the quality of life and sense of place in the city. The goal is to increase the inventory of permanently-protected, publicly-accessible open space that is subject to *Article 97 of the Amendments of the Constitution of the Commonwealth*.

OPEN SPACE ACCESS

Boston’s projected growth has the potential to widen disparities in open space distribution. Many of the densest neighborhoods will be experiencing additional residential development, increasing pressures on existing parks. Creation of new or expanded recreation areas in these neighborhoods will be challenging. Strategic assessment of potential new park spaces (looking at all potential sites - vacant or not), an enhanced public realm, and strong connections to existing green spaces from these neighborhoods are critical.

WALKING DISTANCE TO OPEN SPACE

The Trust for Public Land’s (TPL) *10-Minute Walk Campaign* highlights the importance of park distribution throughout a city. The goal is that all residents should be able to walk to publicly owned open space within ten minutes of where they live. TPL ranks Boston as offering 100% of residents access to a park or schoolyard within a 10-minute walk from home.

BPRD has built on TPL’s work and developed its own walkshed analysis that provides a more fine-grained consideration of the open space system and who it serves. BPRD’s walkshed maps illustrate where park access should be improved in order to meet the goal of access to a high-quality park system for all. Most residents benefit from access to open space of varying types throughout the city, but there are gaps. Service area gaps mean that residents in those areas cannot readily access the benefits of nearby open space. This is discussed in Section 7: Analysis of Needs.

The gaps include current and former industrial areas that have added residential and commercial uses without commensurate protected open space. Gaps exist in areas that haven’t benefited from public investment to establish larger parks. There are gaps in areas where the population and park needs are so great that the demand on existing parks is significant. Lastly, there are gaps in areas where residents don’t have access to specific types of parks.

PARCEL PRIORITY PLAN

BPRD has developed a *Parcel Priority Plan (PPP)* to guide the acquisition of open space. The goal of the PPP is to understand where the best opportunities are for enhancing and enlarging the network of parks in Boston. Parcels are identified in terms of benefits such as providing respite from heat, managing flood waters, expanding access in underserved communities, enhancing wildlife habitat, and connecting existing parks to each other. This is discussed in Section 7: Analysis of Needs.

OPEN SPACE QUALITY AND IMPROVEMENTS

Parks must be equitable not only in their distribution but also their quality - including environmental, health, civic and social, economic and aesthetic factors. Some of these factors are explored in the coming chapters and others are highlighted in Section 9: Action Plan. The multiple uses and values of open space are discussed in Section 2: Introduction.

Designing and sustaining quality parks is one of the highest priorities of the OSRP. What cannot be achieved through creation of new park land must be realized through improving and sustaining the quality and functionality of existing resources, so that these spaces can meet or exceed the level of service that residents and visitors expect.

Stewardship activities include capital reinvestment, maintenance, renovation, restoration, and historic preservation. However, BPRD must focus on innovation to ensure a high quality parks system. Best practices, partnerships and optimization of operations must be explored, implemented, and evaluated. This work requires significant annual funding to sustain, and these investment needs will increase with population growth and increased impacts on park facilities.

OPEN SPACE FUNCTIONALITY AND RESILIENCE

Open spaces are central to the future health, resilience, and livability of Boston. The OSRP complements the City's *Climate Vulnerability Assessment and Climate Action Plan*. These documents identify major climate hazards and set goals and actions for addressing these risks while meeting the City's 2050 carbon-neutrality target. These planning efforts share fundamental objectives to improve quality of life while preparing for climate change.

Strengthening the city's green infrastructure systems can help withstand and temper the impacts of climate change through storm water absorption, tree canopy benefits, and walkable access to active and passive recreational facilities. Expanded open space systems can provide physical buffers to increasingly powerful storms, support systems of non-vehicular transportation, and mitigate the health risks associated with warming urban environments. Park design strategies can ensure that these open space resources are able to bounce back after flood events and some properties can play a key role in providing protection for flood pathways.

CONCLUSION

Section 8: Goals and Objectives introduces the goals and objectives that will lead to success in meeting the interrelated challenges of open space quantity and distribution, open space quality and improvements, and open space functionality and resilience. The goals are as follows:

1. Protect, maintain, manage and improve the City of Boston's open space system to maximize the benefits that this infrastructure provides
2. Sustain and expand an open space system that is equitable, publicly-owned, permanently protected and available to all
3. Promote resilience by supporting the critical relationship between the urban natural environment and quality of life in the city

Section 9: Seven-Year Action Plan presents the action items that will guide BPRD in making informed decisions to improve the inventory of permanently protected open space in the city. Ongoing assessment will be as important as implementation so that corrective action can be taken when needed.

2022 marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of Frederick Law Olmsted, the founder of American landscape architecture and creator of the Emerald Necklace and other parks in Boston. For nearly 150 years, the Parks Commission has been a steward of the City's open space on behalf of the people of Boston. BPRD looks forward to continuing to work with constituents, stakeholders, partners, community leaders and elected officials - to build a better open space system for all.